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Book Review: Making the Case for Progressive Community Planning

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Making the Case for Progressive Community Planning

Reviewed by Tammy Arnstein

Tom Angotti, *New York for Sale: Community Planning Confronts Global Real Estate*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0-262-01247-8

Tom Angotti's *New York For Sale: Community Planning Confronts Global Real Estate* articulates both a systemic community problem and a diverse array of community-based solutions. The problem—displacement of the poor and people of color from their homes and communities—is reflected in the struggle for community rights and empowerment that Angotti views as intrinsic to combating this displacement. The text offers concrete examples of how the displaced and those threatened by displacement are organizing and educating their communities to combat dislocation and to demand justice.

The insights into successful practices are informed by Angotti's more than 20 years of experience as a professional planner and professor of Urban Affairs and Planning at Hunter College, City University of New York. His community and activist planning qualifications are notable: former chair of the Pratt Institute Graduate Center for Planning and the Environment, member of the activist-oriented Steering Committee of Planners Network, and founding member of the New York Campaign and Task Force on Community-based Planning. In *New York For Sale*, Angotti redacts his practitioner and academic experiences, deftly blending the two perspectives to offer a searing critique of what he regards as planning at the service of industrial capitalism and neoliberalism. The author examines New York City community planning responses to a range of community injustices, including urban renewal, gentrification, real estate speculation, large-scale planning, and the concentrations of environmentally hazardous activities in poor communities, while also situating these responses within wider economic, political, and social contexts.

Angotti begins with an overview of the terms and concepts used throughout his text, including his Marxist-derived theoretical perspective on how state-sponsored planning “both reflects and mediates the contradictions of capitalism—contradictions within the capitalist class and between capital and labor” (p. 7). This creates highly unequal and unjust urban and suburban land use patterns and economic and environmental conditions, most notably displacement and environmental injustices. Angotti views the relatively recent movement to resist these oppressions as political acts, stating that he wrote this book explicitly to document the strategies, insights, and knowledge gained by community planners over the years to help inform future community planning efforts. He also gives voice and recognition to community planning and activist groups who often go unrecognized, explaining:

This book...looks at urban policy from the bottom up from the vantage point of the mature, progressive community movements whose struggles for social justice continue to play a powerful role in shaping the city (p. 6).

One of Angotti's basic premises is that planning—“a conscious human activity that envisions and may ultimately determine the urban future” (p. 7)—is not a neutral process and, in fact, is political. The role of planning has seen an ideological shift reflected in the move away from Keynesian state interventionism to neoliberalism, which calls for decentralization, deregulation, and the privatization of public services. In the former political climate, a planner's role was to create technical solutions to social problems, while in the neoliberal regime the planner strives to prevent any interference to market

forces to ensure the most efficient and profitable delivery of goods and services. Both systems have created racial, class, and social inequities that persist today, and that have been instrumental in displacing and marginalizing people of color and poor communities through state-sponsored urban renewal programs in the 1950s and 1960s, divestment in urban communities in the 1970s, real estate speculation and megaprojects, and gentrification.

According to Angotti, progressive community planning is the optimal means by which to counteract the private and public sector actions that historically have degraded community stability and well-being. Progressive community planning, Angotti explains, is

uniquely characterized by its focus on local and global equality, social inclusion, environmental justice, and community land. ...[I]ts purpose is to yield new strategies to bring about fundamental change in our economic and political systems (p. 19).

In essence, progressive community planning is simultaneously a social movement, an incubator for alternatives to the neoliberal planning model, and an avenue of expression for populations whose needs have historically not been taken into consideration.

Angotti is aware that this type of planning is a challenge. He cites two themes that recur throughout the book as critically important caveats and as potential pitfalls in progressive community planning. First, he warns that it is difficult to balance mitigating environmentally dangerous land use practices while simultaneously limiting gentrification and real estate speculation. Angotti points out that after some poor communities took ownership over improvement of their abandoned and crumbling neighborhoods during the period of federal disinvestment from urban communities, they ended up subsequently being displaced by wealthier residents and speculators who were drawn to the revitalizing neighborhoods and who drove up housing values to where the original tenants could not afford to remain. This represents the tragedy of gentrification: residents who put their love and labor into improving their neighborhoods, by, for instance, working to combat unfair burdens of toxic land usage or by cultivating community gardens on abandoned lots, unwittingly create the conditions for their own displacement, precisely because there are no controls or policies in place

to protect them. This is the logic of neoliberal policy, according to Angotti; within this system the government's main role is to facilitate profit at the expense of the guarantee of a decent quality of life for all residents.

The second issue that Angotti identifies as an obstacle for progressive community planning involves challenging the notion of community participation that government or real estate developers claim to embrace as part of their decision-making process. Angotti refers to participatory planning as a "myth," explaining that:

...[P]articipation can mean nothing more than sitting silently at a public hearing or attending scores of meetings that have no significant role in making decisions that matter. Participation can be confused with real democracy—the power of people to collectively control the decisions that affect their economic and environmental futures. Progressive community planning must be inspired by new visions of participatory democracy and not the traditional approach of representative democracy, in which stakeholders represent other people in the planning game (p. 29).

Angotti proposes a corollary to the myth of participatory planning: consensus planning. He refutes the assumption that planning can be conflict-free and yield a win-win situation for every stakeholder. He presents examples of community-planning efforts that consisted of alliances made between groups that did not always agree on outcomes or situations where diverse opinions played out through compromise and negotiation.

Although the book's title pits the interests of disenfranchised communities against those of global real estate, Angotti provides a historical analysis of both the real estate industry and of government planning and policy roles in marginalizing and displacing people of color and low-income communities. He describes the character of the contemporary real estate market in New York City by noting that, in New York, real estate is local while finance is global. Given that these two sectors intersect in many city areas and neighborhoods, the struggle against global finance-backed real estate is simultaneously part of both the local and global arenas. Angotti provides a history of how government policy has facilitated the rise of a powerful real estate market that has systematically segregated communities by race and

class and has displaced and disempowered communities in its quest for additional profit. He also outlines some of the historical oppositional responses to economic, political, and social marginalization, such as the labor union and civil rights movements and efforts to combat exploitation by the real estate market and powerful industries that have been and continue to be economically and politically intertwined.

Angotti provides case study examples of community planning efforts that he has personally documented. There are varying degrees of success with each of these efforts, but the author has identified the reasons for successes and the obstacles that have resulted in failure, resulting in teachable moments within each community planning effort presented. Angotti believes that these lessons are transferable to other urban contexts; yet I question this portability in some cases, given that much of the social, political, and economic landscape discussed is unique to the New York City context. Nevertheless, the organizing tactics employed by community planners offer both inspirational and tactical examples and lessons for progressive community organizers working in varied contexts.

Angotti is not able to offer a recipe for how gentrification and displacement can be kept safely in check, but in his final chapter he provides a list of strategies that progressive urban planners and activists can use in their work, including land use and people-oriented strategies that focus on future generations and prioritize quality of life over profit margins. Ultimately, Angotti's examples of community planning failures and challenges appeared to outweigh the number of successes; yet he remains hopeful that community planning can be a powerful force for social justice if its strategy is to become a multifaceted movement representing a diversity of interests, such as LGBTQ rights, environmental justice, right to housing, anti-racism, and immigrant organizing, to name a few. The most compelling contribution of this book is Angotti's obvious faith in progressive community and social movements and the work of community activists and planners to triumph over neoliberal policies that exacerbate long-standing inequalities. Angotti's argument that there are vital linkages between collective action, community empowerment, and participatory democracy is at once compelling and motivating.

About the Reviewer

Tammy Arnstein is a Ph.D. student in comparative and international education at Teachers College, Columbia University.